**Social Narratives**

**Overview - Defining Social Narratives**



Social narratives are visually represented stories that describe social situations and socially appropriate responses or behaviors to help individuals with ASD acquire and use appropriate social skills. Social skills include communication, problem-solving, decision-making, self-management, and peer relations abilities that allow one to initiate and maintain positive social relationships. There are several narrative strategies that have been developed to address the social skill deficits of individuals with ASD. Social narratives may help the individual gain information about the thoughts and feelings of others, as well as contextual information they may have missed. They can be an effective, inexpensive strategy that supports enhanced social and behavioral understanding.

Have you ever walked into a social function and realized you were not dressed appropriately? How did you feel? Probably embarrassed, stressed, anxious, and so on. Did this make it more difficult to enjoy the evening and interact with others? Probably. This type of social mistake can be difficult for people who do not have social thinking and who have social skill deficits. Think about how much more difficult interacting appropriately would be without the basic social awareness that others possess. It would be much more challenging than just feeling out of place one time. This is the daily challenge that many people with ASD experience. They struggle with the many aspects of social interactions. Social narratives, when written and used effectively, can enhance social functioning for individuals with ASD.



Social narratives are written, descriptive accounts of appropriate social behaviors or responses to common social situations. They are written by parents or educators, at the individuals's language and learning level using visuals to enhance understanding of the content (Myles & Simpson, 2003).

The term *social narratives* can be defined as a specific strategy (see guidelines below) but also encompass a group of additional interventions that are similar in that they address social understanding, but differ in the specific procedures utilized. In this module we will first describe social narratives as a strategy. We will then provide a brief overview of other social narrative strategies.

Social narratives can be used:

* after a social "error" has occurred (e.g., saying something rude to a classmate, hitting, yelling)
* prior to a transition or new experience (getting a haircut, changing schools, going to the Dr.'s office, etc.)
* as an intervention to reduce existing recurring behaviors (nose picking, blurting out in class, etc.)

The use of social narratives strategies by the individual must be taught through direct instruction. In many cases the content of the social narrative will be developed in conjunction with the individual. In other cases, the instructor will develop the narrative and introduce it to the individual as the first step of instruction.

How do you know if a social narrative is working? It is recommended that you collect data prior to implementation, during implementation, and after implementation to determine intervention effectiveness.

# Guidelines for Constructing Social Narratives

**1. Identify a social situation for intervention.**
The author of the social narrative selects a social behavior for change, preferably one in which improvement will result in positive social interactions, a safer environment, additional social learning opportunities, or all three.

**2. Define the target behavior for data collection.**
It is necessary to clearly define the behavior on which data will be collected. The behavior should be defined in such a way that the individual and everyone who will be collecting data understands it.

**3. Collect baseline data on the target behavior.**
Collecting data over an extended period of time allows for determining a trend. Baseline data collection can last from three to five days or longer.

**4. Write a social narrative using language at the individual's level. Consider whether to use first-person ("I") or second-person ("you") language.**
Social narratives should be written in accordance with the individual's comprehension skills, with vocabulary and print size individualized for them. The author must decide whether the social narrative would be more effective if it is written with "I" statements (e.g., I need to remember to ...) or "you" statements (e.g., You need to remember that ...). The narrative can be constructed using the present (to describe a situation as it occurs) or future tense (to anticipate an upcoming event).

**5. Choose the number of sentences per page according to the individual's functioning level.**
For some individuals, one to three sentences per page is fine. Each sentence allows the individual to focus on and process a specific concept. For others, more than one sentence per page may result in an overload of information such that the individual does not comprehend the information.

**6. Use photographs, hand-drawn pictures, or pictorial icons.**
Pictures, such as photographs, hand-drawn pictures, or computer-generated icons, may enhance understanding of appropriate behavior, especially with individuals who lack or who have emerging reading skills or are visual learners.

**7. Read the social narrative to the individual and model the desired behavior.** To teach the use of the social narrative, use 1-to-1 direct instruction. The direct instruction will include reading the social narrative to or with the individual and modeling the related behaviors for them. Reading the social narrative and modeling related behaviors should become a consistent part of the individual's daily schedule. The individual who is able to read independently may read the narrative to peers or adults so that all have a similar understanding of the targeted situation and expected behaviors.

**8. Collect intervention data.**
The author should collect data using the procedures described for collecting and analyzing baseline data in numbers 2 and 3 above.

**9. Review the findings and related social narrative procedures.**
If the individual does not respond with the desired behavior approximately two weeks from the introduction of the social narrative, the author should review the narrative and its implementation procedures. If program alterations are made, it is recommended that only one variable be changed at a time (e.g., change only the content of the story rather than simultaneously changing the time the story is read and the person who reads it). By changing only one factor at a time, it is possible to determine which factor(s) best facilitate a individual's learning.

**10. Program for maintenance and generalization.**
After a behavior change has become consistent, it is recommended that the social narrative be faded. Fading may be accomplished by extending the time between readings or having students be responsible for reading the story themselves. In some cases, the social narrative is not faded. This decision should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Adapted From: The Hidden Curriculum (p. 26) by B. S. Myles, M. L. Trautman, & R. Schelvan, 2004. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company. Used with permission.



One method of presentation for social narratives can be a slide show, such as Power Point or Keynote. This gives a limited amount of information per slide, can use visual images to demonstrate the words, and allows the viewer to control how long he/she looks at each slide. For some students, it might be helpful to record the words so he/she can listen to the text while reading. Be sure to have the student review the slide show frequently and practice the desired social behavior. [Click here to view the slide show example](http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/up_doc/NoSweatTakingtheStressoutofConversations.pdf).

# Social Stories (TM) and Social Articles (TM)

Social stories(TM) are individualized stories that describe a social situation, often from the individual with ASD's perspective. Social articles(TM) are similar to Social Stories(TM) except that they are written for adults. Both can be written in a variety of formats, including pictures with words, text alone, audiotapes, videotapes, PowerPoint, etc. The Social Story(TM) often includes information about how others feel, why the situation occurs, how others may react to the situation, and where and why the situation occurs. Social stories are written in a specifically delineated format and style explained in Gray's Social Stories(TM) (www.thegraycenter.org).

Carol Gray suggests that when writing Social Stories(TM) at least 50% of the story provides positive reinforcement for an achievement or something they are doing well. All social stories(TM) are written in positive language and contain mostly descriptive sentences. A Social Story(TM) is written from a first-or a third-person perspective, avoiding the use of terms such as "you should" or "you need to."

## Case Study: Jacob



My name is Jacob. I am in the second grade. Sometimes the children in my class stand in a line.

The children in my class stand in a line when we are getting ready to go to another part of the school like the lunchroom or the library.

The children in my class walk in a line to move safely in the halls. If another group of students are walking in the hall going in a different direction, our class and their class can pass one another easily. That's why teachers have asked children to walk in lines for many years. It is a safe and orderly way to move groups of children through the school building.

Sometimes I am the line leader. This means that the other children in my class will walk behind me. Sometimes I am second, or third, last, or another position.

Many children in my class like to be the line leader. My teacher knows who the line leader is each day. Teachers know about being fair and try to make sure each child gets a turn to be the Line Leader.

It's important to follow directions about who is line leader. My turn to be line leader again gets closer every time the children in my class walk in a line!

The video clip below shows a speech and language therapist using a Social Story (TM) with a student to work on the skills of how to enter a conversation, how to wait, and taking turns in conversations.

# What Does the Research Say?

The most frequently used and well-known social narrative strategy is Social Stories(TM) (Gray 1995; Gray & Gerand, 1993). Of the over 50 articles published on Social Stories (TM) most are "how-to" articles, and only a few are empirical studies. Recently a number of single-subject studies have been used to demonstrate the effectiveness of Social Stories (TM) (Scattone, Tingstrom, & Wilczynki, 2006; Swaggart, et al., 1995). Others include Kuttler, Myles, and Carlson (1998), Lorimer, Simpson, Myles, and Ganz (2002), and Kuoch and Mirenda (2003).

The research suggests that Social Stories (TM) have been used successfully to decrease aggression, tantrums, inappropriate table manners, self-help skills, and transitions (Scattone, Tingstrom, & Wilczynksi 2006). It is not clear from research whom the strategy benefits most, although it has been suggested it works best for high-functioning students with autism (Simpson, 2004).

# Social Scripts

Social scripts are the most basic of social narrative strategies. They provide an individual with statements, comments and questions to use in specific social scenarios that they may have difficulty navigating on their own. Social scripts can include conversation starters, responses to common questions, or even appropriate phrases to change the topic of conversation. The script gives the individual the language they need to participate appropriately in an identified social situation.

Social scripts can reduce the stress of social interactions that individuals on the spectrum can experience. A social script can provide an entire social exchange such as ordering successfully at a fast food restaurant. Scripts can also offer suggested phrases for use in a particular type of situation such as asking to join in a game, or inviting someone to play or initiating a conversation with a peer.

Scripts cannot be used in all situations, however, and their overuse can make the individual appear too rehearsed. An important part of using a social script successfully is practicing the script with the child so that different responses to the scripted language can be identified and the individual can be taught to respond appropriately. For example, if an individual uses his script to ask to join in a game expecting the answer to be "yes" and the answer is "no", the script must anticipate that possibility and include appropriate responses and actions for that answer. (Henry and Myles, 2007, p.94.)

## Case Study: Matthew



Matthew's favorite place to eat out is Wendy's. He likes the Quarter Pounder TM with cheese and nothing else. His mother developed the following Script for him to use when ordering at Wendy's

**Ordering at Wendy's**

When I go to Wendy's I like to order a SingleTM with cheese and nothing else on it. When the person taking the order at Wendy's says: "Can I help you?" I say: "I want a SingleTM with cheese only on it. No onion, no tomato, no lettuce and no mayonnaise." They usually say "SingleTM, cheese only?" And I say: "Yes, please."

The person taking my order usually says: "Do you want fries?" And I say, "Yes, please, medium fries and a medium Sprite to drink."

The person behind the counter then asks me if that will be all, and I say: "Yes, thank you."

I give the person my money and they give me my change. I take one step to the side at the counter so the person behind me can give their order while I wait for my order to be put on the counter.

# Cartooning

Visual symbols like those often used in cartoons are helpful in making abstract events more meaningful as well as providing opportunities for a student to read and review them over time. Cartooning has been used for many years by speech and language pathologists to enhance meaning for people with cognitive, communicative, and social deficits.

Cartooning here refers to the use of cartoons to enhance social understanding. One example is to draw stick figures with thought bubbles to indicate what someone is thinking, often laid out in a comic strip-like format. Cartooning can be a useful strategy when working with a student with an ASD who is unaware what someone else might have been thinking due to difficulties with "theory of mind" tasks.

There is limited scientific support for cartooning. However, some evidence suggests that individuals with Asperger Syndrome or high-functioning autism may benefit from a more structured comic strip format (discussed on next page) to gain information on social situations and interactions (Howlin et al., 1999; Rogers & Myles 2001).

## Case Study: Roy



Roy was having a problem in his preschool classroom. Roy was pushing his classmate LaVerne in many different environments. The teacher was very concerned about the pushing and wasn't sure why it was happening. His teacher used cartooning to find out what he was thinking. The teacher drew Roy pushing LaVerne while waiting for the bus, in the play area, and at the lunch table. Roy then shared what to draw in the last block and the teacher found out he was just trying to play.

The student in the following video clip caught on very quickly to a lesson her teacher gave using cartooning about what things to say out loud and what things to keep as thoughts in your head. The student then taught the lesson to her own class and the other classrooms in her grade level. This is a demonstration of that lesson.

# Comic Strip Conversations (TM)

Comic strip conversations utilize simple drawing to illustrate what people say, do, and think. Developed by Carol Gray in 1994, comic strip conversations are possibly the most widely used cartooning strategy. The following structure is recommended for use in creating comic strip conversations:

**1. Engage in small talk:** Gray suggests that the adult and the individual with ASD engage in small talk unrelated to the problem situation for a few minutes prior to starting the comic strip conversation. This is a time when individual-teacher rapport can be enhanced.

**2. Draw about a given situation:** The individual with ASD or the teacher can draw about the situation using simple stick figures to represent a given situation. The adult can assist the individual's drawing or recollection of the event by asking questions such as, "Who else was there?", "What did you do?", or "What did others do?".

**3. Present perspective:** Gray recommends that the individual have as much control as possible during the cartooning session. Adults can share insight into the situation when an opportunity presents itself but should not dominate the discussion. The goal is to achieve some balance between the collecting information about the individual's perspective and perception of the situation and the adult's responsibility to share accurate social information.

**4. Provide sequence or structure:** Comic strip boxes may be used in which the individual with ASD (or the adult) draws figures. This is particularly helpful if the individual has organizational problems. Additionally, the boxes can be reordered if an event is drawn out of sequence.

**5. Summarize the cartoon:** The overall information from the comic strip conversation is synthesized into a summary. The individual with ASD should communicate this as independently as possible with the adult clarifying when needed. The summary helps ensure that the adult and individual have the same understanding of the situation described in the comic strip conversation.

**6.** **Identify new solutions**: The individual with ASD, as independently as possible, begins to think about new outcomes of the event described in the Comic Strip Conversation (TM). Each solution is written down and discussed by the individual and the adult in terms of advantages and disadvantages. Because it is written down the individual can keep the list of outcomes and make a plan for future situations.

Adapted from The Hidden Curriculum (p. 26) by B. S. Myles, M. L. Trautman, & R. Schelvan, 2004. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

# Power Cards

Power Cards are visual aids that incorporate a child's special interest to help promote an understanding of social situations, hidden curriculum items, routines, organizational skills and transitions. The Power Card strategy consists of a script and a Power Card (Gagnon, 2001).

### About Power Cards****:****

* They are visuals that incorporate a child's special interest in a brief scenario that deals with a situation that is difficult for the child.
* They are written in the first person from the perspective of a child's hero and describe how the hero solves the problem.
* A small card recaps how the child can use the same strategy to solve a similar problem of her own.

### The Script:

* In the first paragraph the hero or role model attempts to solve a problem and experiences success.
* The second paragraph encourages the student to try a new behavior which is broken down into 3-5 manageable steps.

### The Power Card:

* The Power Card is the size of a trading card, bookmark, or business card.
* It contains a small picture of the special interest and the solution to a problem broken into 3-5 steps.

Adapted from Power Cards: Using Special Interests to Motivate Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome and Autism (p. 21) by E. Gagnon. 2001. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.



Will Smith is a cool guy who has made a lot of movies. It takes a lot of people doing many jobs to make a good movie. Sometimes mistakes are made by Will or others on the movie set.

Will Smith stays calm when he or someone else makes a mistake. If he needs to, he asks for help. Will Smith knows that everyone make mistakes.

Will would like everyone to remember to stay calm when mistakes happen, to ask for help if it is needed, and that EVERYONE makes mistakes!

**Will Smith wants me to remember:**

* **Stay calm when I make a mistake**
* **Stay calm when someone else makes a mistake**
* **Ask for help when I make a mistake**
* **Everyone makes mistakes!**

# Social Autopsies

Richard Lavoie (Bieber, 1994) developed the concept of social autopsies to help individuals with social deficits understand social errors or mistakes. The social autopsy format is designed to aid in discussing and dissecting a social error to aid in understanding. Unlike the other strategies discussed in this module, social autopsies are more verbal than visual in format.

After a social error, the adult verbally prompts the individual to answer questions that aid in clarifying the event and ensure that they both have the same understanding. After all information is gathered, the individual is asked to do the following:
1. Identify the error
2. Determine who was harmed by the error
3. Decide how to correct the error
4. Develop a plan so the error doesn't happen again

## Case Study: Social Autopsy Playing Kickball



What Happened?

They wouldn't let me play kickball with them on the playground. They said "No. We have even teams and the game has already started." I took the ball and ran away.

What was the social error?

I took the ball and ran away.

What should be done to correct the error?

I should apologize to the kids who were playing kickball and promise not to take their ball away.

What could be done next time?

I should ask to play when they start the game and if the kids say no, I shouldn't take their ball. I should find another game to play on the playground. I could ask for another ball and get some other kids to play with me.

# Social Narrative Case Study

## Case Study: Matthew at Soccer



Matthew is a seventh-grade student with high-functioning autism. Although, he is very bright, and included in all general education classes, he still struggles with many social situations. His teachers and classmates understand that he has ASD but sometimes still become frustrated with Matthew when he acts immaturely or talks non-stop about certain topics. Over the last 10 years his parents and educational team have provided him with a variety of social narratives to help him understand and be more successful in social situations. This enhanced understanding has improved his ability to interact with other students and teachers. Additionally, the social narratives have enabled him to be more successful in community activities such as church group, youth soccer, eating out, and shopping.

At the age of 5 Matthew took an interest in soccer. Although he was very interested in soccer, the fast pace of the game and a lack of understanding of the rules limited Matthew's success.

Below is a brief excerpt from one of the soccer narratives used with Matthew. Many aspects of the game were discussed via social narratives. Most of the time the team focused on what soccer players usually do (descriptive) and what the coach's role is, and less on what Matthew was expected to do. This was an effective way for him to use the soccer stories.

**Matthew Playing Soccer**

**Playing Soccer: Soccer is a sport played by a team of players. Soccer can be a great way to exercise and also have fun. When playing soccer, players from one team try to dribble or pass the ball down the field to their teammates and then kick it into the other team's goal. One of the rules of soccer is that, except for the goalie, the players don't touch the ball with their hands. The coach will use practice time to explain some of the other rules for soccer. The coach will decide what position each player will play and when players need to join the game or "sub out."**

## Case Study: Matthew Being A Good Classmate



Another issue for Matthew was getting very silly in class and in other social situations. His educational team tried several types of social narratives to assist him with decreasing silly behaviors. The following is a narrative that was developed to help Matthew decrease silly behaviors and responses in the classroom setting, written in first-person language.

**Sometimes school is fun. Having fun at school is a great way to learn and make friends. Sometimes having fun at school can make kids act silly. Sometimes being silly is okay, but usually not in the classroom. Occasionally, when I get silly it can be hard to stop. I might use a loud voice or laugh for a long time about something. Using a loud voice or laughing for a long time can distract others from paying attention in class. If this happens to me I can:**

**1) Sit up straight**

**2) Close my mouth (it's hard to laugh with your mouth closed)**

**3) Think about something that is not funny (like going to the principal's office)**

**4) Use a good, inside voice**

**Trying not to be silly at school will help me be a successful student. It will also help me be a good classmate to the kids in my class.**

## Case Study: Matthew At Sunday School



Matthew's family goes to Sunday School most Sundays. At church, the entire family sits together for the initial part of the service and then all the children and youth move to their classrooms divided by age group. Transition to this group and appropriate participation in the Sunday School class has been difficult for Matthew. Here's a social story that was developed to help Matthew manage this transition and help him learn to participate in his Sunday School class without talking too much.

**Sunday School**

**Some Sundays I go to church with my Mom and Dad. At first we sit all together in the Sanctuary to pray and sing songs and listen to the Pastor or the Deacon.**

**After the third song, the Pastor or Deacon dismisses all the children so we can go to our Sunday School class in the Education building. Every age group has a different Sunday School classroom. My class is in room 4 with the other Middle School kids.**

**Mr. Crawford is usually my Sunday School teacher, but sometimes, if he misses, someone else will be my teacher. In Sunday School class, the teacher tells us about the Bible story lesson for the day.**

**Sometimes the teacher asks us questions about the lesson about what is right and wrong. I usually know the answers to the questions, but I shouldn't answer all of them. Other kids need a chance to answer too.**

**After Sunday School class is over and the teacher dismisses us, I can go to the Sanctuary to find my parents.**

# Summary

While no large-scale research studies have been done on the effectiveness of social narratives for individuals with ASD, many small studies have reported moderate to substantial gains in self-awareness, self-calming, and self-management (Myles & Simpson, 2003). In addition, many educators, parents, and others have provided anecdotal accounts of success when utilizing social narratives.

Each of the strategies in this module may be effective ways to teach social understanding and competence to individuals with an ASD. Regardless of the specific strategy or approach used, it is essential that those working with individuals with social and cognitive challenges understand the need for utilizing a variety of methods to teach appropriate social responses and skills, using data to make decisions about the success of an intervention for a specific individual.

# Discussion Questions

[ [Export PDF with Answers](http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/pdf_dis_ques.php?mod_id=18) | [Export PDF without Answers](http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/pdf_dis_ques.php?mod_id=18&no_answer=1) ]

1. **Are Social Stories(TM) the only kind of social narrative?**

A correct answer should contain:

Social Stories(TM) are one kind of social narrative. There are many different kinds of social narratives that can be used to enhance and promote an individual's social understanding. Social narratives can help an individual with autism spectrum disorders learn about some of the aspects of social context and theory of mind that he or she may miss.

1. **Are pictures or graphics always used with social narratives?**

A correct answer should contain:

Pictures or graphics are used when appropriate for the individual for whom the narrative is written. They can aid in comprehension but are not be used in every situation. For example, you probably wouldn't use pictures in a social narrative written for a high school student who can read fluently.

1. **How do I choose which kind of social narrative to use?**

A correct answer should contain:

It is helpful to take a team approach to determining what type of social narrative to develop. If the individual needs some extra motivation, a Power Card might be appropriate because of the built-in reinforcement. If the individual simply needs additional information to handle a problem situation, a Social StoryTM might be appropriate. If a child needs to talk about a stressful social situation that occurred previously, a social autopsy or comic strip conversation might be most appropriate.

1. **When is the social narrative introduced?**

A correct answer should contain:

A social narrative is introduced when a social behavior has been identified for change, preferably one in which improvement can result in positive social interactions, a safer environment, additional social learning opportunities, or all three. Social narratives are introduced and taught through direct instruction that is about the social situation selected. The social narrative is used as a part of the child's daily routine, sometimes prior to the time of day the problem situation is likely to occur.

1. **What if the student does not respond positively to the strategy?**

A correct answer should contain:

If, after two weeks of using the social narrative strategy, there isn't a positive response, the narrative and implementation procedures should be reviewed. Perhaps the narrative needs to be written in a more positive way, perhaps the direct instruction regarding the purpose and use of the strategy was not sufficient to explain the social error and the demands of the situation. A different type of narrative strategy might be employed to address a particular situation. It is important to make only one change at a time so that helpful information can be gathered on the student's learning preferences.

Top of Form

# Citation and References

If included in presentations or publications, credit should be given to the authors of this module. Please use the citation below to reference this content.

Annette Wragge (2011). Social narratives: Online training module (Columbus, OH: OCALI). In Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI), Autism Internet Modules, www.autisminternetmodules.org. Columbus, OH: OCALI.

## References

Adreon, D. & Myles, B.S. (2001). Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Practical Solutions for School Success. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Bieber, J. (1994). Learning disabilities and social skills with Richard LaVoie: Last one picked...First one picked on. Washington, DC: Public Broadcasting Service

Gagnon, E. (2001). The Power Card Strategy: Using special interests to motivate children and youth with Asperger Syndrome. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Gray, C. (1994). Comic Strip Conversations: Illustrated interactions that teach conversation skills to students with autism and related disorders. Jenison, MI: Jenison Public Schools

Gray, C. (2005). Social StoriesTM 10.0: Updated Guidelines and Criteria for Writing Social Stories. PDF Download: www.thegraycenter.org.

Myles, B.S. Trautman, M.L., & Schelvan, R.L. (2004). The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Myles, B.S. (2005). Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome:Strategies for Success in Inclusive Settings. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.